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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a discussion of the importance of voluntary childlessness as a contemporary social phenomenon. The negative attitudes associated with voluntary childlessness are discussed in a brief summary of recent literature. An exploration of the methodological limitations of existing research is included which emphasizes its usefulness for hypothesis formation and points to the need for more in-depth studies. A research strategy based in a theoretical foundation is outlined in terms of five propositions dealing with both the antecedents and consequences of fertility choices, including: (1) the husband's and wife's freedom from traditional sex role identification; (2) sex role identification and fertility values formed by experiences in the family of origin; (3) decision-making patterns in the marriage; (4) the quality of a marriage without children; and (5) the potential for individual development in a childless marriage. A chart illustrating a schema for couple's development is also provided. (Author/MCF)

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VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS: A CRITIQUE OF EXISTING RESEARCH AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY*

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Introduction

The childfree marriage can be viewed as a form of voluntary population control which is emerging as a contemporary lifestyle. It is a phenomenon of increasing frequency. For example, Veevers (1972) found that approximately 5% of the population in the United States and Canada are voluntarily childless. A 1973 issue of Newsweek reported that the number of married couples who are choosing to not have children has tripled in six years. The 1973 census bureau report found that 4% of wives expected to remain childless, representing a sizeable increase from the 1.7% reported in 1967. More recently, Silka and Kiesler (1976), citing a 1975 census bureau report, stated that as many as 4.9% of married white women aged 20-29 expect to have no children. Thus, voluntary childlessness, as measured through self-reported expectations of married women, continues to increase in prevalence.

Voluntary childlessness is part of the larger pattern of declining birthrates in the contemporary U.S.A. This pattern is appearing across a wide section of the socio-economic spectrum. A recent study found "a remarkable convergence of fertility patterns taking place among the whole range of social, economic, racial, and religious groups" (Menken and Watkins, 1976). So, too, Sweet (1974) found a 25% decline in the fertility of married urban white females between 1960 and 1970, with comparable declines among minority and ethnic groups. Moreover, Westoff and Ryder (1976) found that the decline in fertility is attributable almost entirely to voluntary methods.

Despite the importance of voluntary childlessness, little attention has been given to it by research investigators until very recently.

The psychological literature has traditionally viewed parenthood as a "necessary and natural part of normal social life" (Veevers, 1973a), as a universal developmental stage (Deutsch, 1945; Erikson, 1963; Bendek, 197), as a biological need (Bardwick, 1974, 1971) and as an indication of appropriate sex role socialization (Bardwick, 1971). This literature has portrayed the childless woman as selfish, irresponsible, immature, abnormal, unnatural, or neurotic (Veevers, 1973b; Rainwater, 1965; Popenoe, 1936; Flarsheim, 1975). However, the findings of recent research which has compared childfree couples or females with those who desire children do not support the hypothesis that non-parenthood is abnormal and that the childless woman and couple represent a failure in development. Specifically, Hoffman (1978) found no significant differences between child-free and child-anticipated couples with regard to marital adjustment, marital type, sex role identification, and the desire to be generative in one's life. In addition, Teicholz (1977) found that childfree women and women who desire children were similar in social adjustment, mental health, and sex role identification. These findings cause us to re-examine the negative characteristics previously attributed to the childless, and to consider voluntary childlessness as a viable life style.

Many of the studies of the voluntarily childless have had severe methodological limitations. First of all, much of the earlier research was anecdotal in nature. While this was useful for the exploratory, hypothesis-formulating stage of research, there is a need now for more empirical studies. Second, most research has either not utilized comparison groups (i.e. Cooper, Cumber, and Hartner, 1978; Marciano, 1978), or has compared childfree couples with couples who already had children (i.e.

Bernard, 1972; Campbell, 1975). These latter studies, which examined the relationship between the fertility decision and the quality of the marriage were confounded by the presence of children in the pro-natalist group. The variable of children in the home is known to influence the dependent variable (quality of the marriage) (Hurley and Palonen, 1967; Renne, 1970; LeMasters, 1957). The only studies to date which have removed the confounding variable of children in the home by comparing the voluntarily childless with those anticipating having children are the studies by Teicholz (1977) and Hoffman (1978). Third, most research on voluntary childlessness has examined the characteristics of the wife alone, and not of the husband nor of the couple. Veevers (1973b) and Teicholz's (1977) studies are of this type. There are three studies only which have examined the marital couple (Hoffman, 1978; Cooper, Cumber, and Hartner, 1978; Marciano, 1978); however, only one of these, (Hoffman, 1978) also utilized a comparison group. Fourth, even the best of the recent studies are limited in their generalizability because of the characteristics of their samples (Hoffman, 1978; Teicholz, 1977). For one thing the samples were limited to a narrow band of the socioeconomic spectrum, namely highly educated, middle and upper middle income groups. Moreover, the studies focused on only one stage of the life cycle (the 25-35 year period).

In addition to these methodological problems, most of the previous research was also limited in regard to objectives. The studies as a group were concerned with comparing the voluntarily childless with child-anticipated (or child-present) groups in regard to the quality of the marriage and the individual psychological qualities of the marital partners.

No attempt has yet been made to conduct an indepth investigation of the antecedents and consequences of particular fertility decisions.

Formulation of a research strategy

There is thus a need for systematic research on voluntary childlessness which transcends the methodological limitations of previous work, and which has the more ambitious aim of studying the antecedents and consequences (for the couple) of particular fertility choices. I have constructed a set of propositions regarding both the antecedents and the consequences of fertility decisions, which I would propose as a theoretical foundation for research in this area.

Antecedents of voluntary childlessness

(1) The decision to not have children requires, of both the husband and wife, a freedom from traditional sex role identifications, a preference for the companionship type marriage, and a moderate to high degree of role flexibility in the marriage.

Contemporary changes in the status of women in our society may account for a large portion of the variance of the recent fertility decline. The widening of opportunities for women, along with associated changes in sex role behavior in sections of our society, has made it possible for many women to pursue a career or other life patterns instead of raising a family. However, while the fertility decline appears to be spread more or less evenly throughout our society, not all women are divesting themselves of traditional sex role behavior. For example, an

appraisal of sex role stereotypes among college students (Broverman, 1972) found that current concepts of the ideal female and male for both sexes still closely resemble sex role stereotypes. These "pervasive and persistent" sex role stereotypes cut across lines of sex, socio-economic status and religion. Thus, traditional roles which include parenthood may still be strongly influential even among a population which appears to adopt a more liberal attitude toward men and women.

I would propose as an hypothesis that the degree to which individuals are able to participate in the new socially-sanctioned changes in sex role behavior depends on the nature of their sex role socialization. Those who were socialized into traditional sex roles will have strong traditional sex role identification, and will prefer these traditional roles to the newer possibilities. Those who were not socialized into the traditional sex roles will be more androgynous (Bem, 1974, 1975, 1976). Androgynous individuals describe themselves as having a balance of masculine and feminine traits. From her research, Bem (1975, 1976) has concluded that psychologically androgynous individuals demonstrate sex role adaptability which "enables them to engage in situationally effective behavior without regard for its stereotype as masculine or feminine."

The marriage literature has long utilized a two-category classification of marriages - the institutional and the companionship types (Hicks and Platt, 1970). The former is a traditional marriage founded on sex-differentiated roles. In this model, the husband is required to perform instrumental (task-oriented) roles. The wife is required to perform expressive affect-oriented functions. Instrumental aspects of the marriage take precedence over the expressive and are considered significant for

marital adjustment. The companionship model of marriage emphasizes role flexibility. Expressive aspects of the relationship predominate and are considered central to the couple's marital adjustment. These aspects include such variables as affection, communication and companionship. This model of marriage is considered non-traditional in its emphasis on husband and wife sharing both instrumental and expressive roles.

I would propose as an hypothesis that androgynous individuals will opt for companionship marriages with a greater degree of role flexibility. The companionship marriage and a moderate to high degree of role flexibility create more options and as a consequence will be more often associated with voluntary childlessness.

Hoffman (1978) compared childfree and child-anticipated couples in regard to sex role identification and marital type, and found no significant differences between the groups on these variables. These results are contrary to the proposed hypotheses. However, Hoffman's study is not an adequate test of these hypotheses because of the skewed nature of her sample. Subjects in both groups were 25-35 years of age, highly educated, in the middle and upper middle income groups, and predominantly androgynous with companionship marriages. However, there were trends in the data (also noted by Teicholz, 1977) which indicated possible differences between the two groups in regard to sex role identification. Childfree women tended to view themselves less traditionally with regard to sex role stereotypes.

(2) Sex role identification and fertility values are formed by experiences in the family of origin.

The family of origin is a very important learning environment with regard to the development of self-concept or identity (including sex role

identities), and the learning of behavioral repertoires associated with particular roles (including sex roles). There is a great deal of support for this proposition from a range of theoretical perspectives in psychology including psychodynamic thinkers (Erikson, 1968), humanist theorists (Rogers, 1951), and behavioral theorists (Bandura and Walters, 1963). Moreover, sociologists such as Parsons (Parsons and Bales, 1955) have formulated theoretical models which specify the manner in which family structure (particularly the age-sex structure) influences the socialization of children (with particular reference to the development of gender-linked roles).

With regard to the development of sex role identity, the socialization process begins at birth. Rubin, Provenzano and Luria (1974) found that parents perceive sex differences in infants which may effect behavior toward the child as early as the first 24 hours of the infant's life.

The social learning theorists have called attention to the importance of modeling in the learning of role-specific behavioral patterns (Bandura, 1965; Mischel, 1970). With regard to the learning of gender roles, this theory would assert the importance of the same sex parent as role model. For example, Goodstein and Sargeant (1977), in an article addressing psychological theories of sex differences, stated that: "same sex parents are very important models for children. Since we differentiate the sexes at birth, the same sex parent provides the earliest and most constant role model for the child's gender development." However, some theorists challenge the view that children model themselves solely or even primarily after the same sex parent (Williams, 1973; Macoby and Jacklin, 1974;

Heatherington, 1965). There is some evidence in support of this latter view, which indicates that the child's judgment of parental adequacy plays a determining role in the choice of parental role models (Simmons and Turner, 1976). This issue of modeling is important to the question of the development of sex role identity, particularly the matter of whether sex role identity is stereotyped or androgynous. Williams (1973) hypothesized that children who model after both parents will be more androgynous in the sex role identities.

The family of origin is also a most significant factor in the development of one's value system (which includes fertility values) and in providing the foundation for the making of life decisions (such as fertility decisions). Kantor and Lehr (1975) theorized that the family provides its members with "critical images" and "fundamental meanings," which reflect the value and meaning dimensions of the particular family. These orienting images and ways of determining meaning provide the framework for the making of later life choices.

The empirical findings on the family backgrounds of people who choose voluntary childlessness are inconsistent. On the one hand these studies such as Lichtman's (1976), in which voluntarily childless couples were found to have come from families where children were perceived as being obstacles to personal growth, and destructive of the marital relationship. In these families, negative fertility values were transmitted. Reflecting similar findings, Centers and Blumburg (1954) stated that "individuals with unhappy family backgrounds are disproportionately represented among the minority of people who want no children." On the other hand, Veevers (1972) found that voluntarily childless women came from relatively stable and positive home environments, in which positive fertility values were

transmitted.

Other studies which have examined the association between the family of origin and fertility values have found that: (1) family size preferences vary directly with the size of the family of origin (McAllister, Stokes and Knapp, 1974); (2) a positive family experience is associated with the process of modeling family size preferences after the size of the family of origin (Hendershot, 1969; Simmons and Turner, 1976); and (3) birth order affects fertility values (Johnson, Stokes, Conder, and Smith, 1977). There is thus support for the proposition that family of origin influences the development of fertility values (see also: Bumpass, 1967; Westoff and Potvin, 1969). However, "the transfer of fertility attitudes and behavior is a complex process which has not been adequately studied" (Simmons and Turner, 1976).

In regard to this proposition I would not only propose the hypothesis that sex role identification and fertility values are formed in the family of origin, but also suggest that more detailed hypotheses be developed in three areas: (1) the role of modeling and other variables which effect the development of sex role identity, particularly the degree to which it is stereotyped vs. androgynous; (2) the role of inter-generational modeling of family size and other variables which influence the development of fertility value positions, particularly the voluntarily childless position; and (3) the relationships between the development of sex role identity and the development of fertility values.

(3) The outcome of the fertility decision is influenced both by the fertility values of the marital partners, and by the decision-making patterns in the marriage. Voluntarily childless couples will more often utilize nontraditional (mutual and wife-influential) decision-making patterns.

Fertility values are not the sole determinants of fertility decisions. The actual fertility decision is also influenced by the interaction patterns of the marital partners, particularly their decision-making patterns.

Two recent research projects examined this problem. Cooper, Cumber and Hartner (1978) found that voluntarily childless couples tended to arrive at their fertility decision in two distinct ways. They termed one group of couples "Independents," the other "Negotiators." The former group had reached their decision independently prior to marriage and would not have married someone with conflicting fertility values. About one-third however, were "Negotiators." These couples had not reached definite conclusions regarding childbearing prior to marriage and saw the marital decision-making process as essential for resolving this issue. Within the larger group of negotiator couples, there were subgroups: "Mutuals," "Wife Influential" and "Husband Influential." The Mutuals were characterized by consistent agreement throughout the decision-making process whereas the other two sub-groups experienced a power differential in the effort to arrive at a decision.

The power differential was the primary focus of Marciano's (1978) study of voluntarily childless couples. In her sample of 40 couples, half were Independents and half were Negotiators who had experienced a long period of conflict and negotiation. Marciano found that when couples differed with regard to the fertility choice, wives tended to adapt to their husband's preference to be childfree, whereas very few husbands chose to adapt to their wive's choice. The wives felt pressure to conform to their husbands' desires fearing that a lack of compliance on their part might severely disrupt the marriage. Husbands, however,

were less fearful and expressed hopefulness that their wives would ultimately agree with them. Marciano concluded that men may have "stronger bargaining power within marriage" and suggests that the childfree marriage may be characterized by traditional role behavior with regard to the decision-making process.

Both studies suggest that certain people, presumably those with well-developed fertility values, seek spouses with similar values. In these situations the decision to not have children is made prior to marriage. Other people, however, make the decision through the process of conflict and negotiation within the marriage. In this group it is unclear to what extent and under what conditions traditional patterns of male dominance prevail. The two studies present conflicting findings on this point.

These two studies are limited by the nature of their sample (highly educated, upper income groups), by the lack of comparison groups, and by the use of self-report measurement strategies (interviews and questionnaires). I would propose that this problem be examined more rigorously, using a wider sample of the socio-economic spectrum, comparison groups, and a more objective measurement approach, such as behavioral observation of marital interaction.

Consequences of voluntary childlessness

(1) The decision to not have children will not diminish the quality of the marriage, nor will it prevent the attainment of any of the developmental stages of the marital relationship over the life style.

Despite the fact that cultural and societal influences place a high priority on marriage and parenting as a desirable life choice for most

men and women, some of the findings of martial research indicate happiness decreases with the presence of children (Hurley and Palonen, 1970; Renne, 1970; Le Masters, 1957).

Several retrospective studies have observed a curvilinear relationship between marital satisfaction and stages of the life cycle. Rollins and Feldman (1970) studied marital satisfaction levels over the seven stages of the family life cycle (pre-child, pre-school child, school-age child, teenage child, young adults, empty nest, and retirement). They found that the highest marital satisfaction levels were at the pre-child and retirement stages of family development. The levels dropped after the birth of the child, rising for both husbands and wives during the middle of the empty nest stage. Burr (1970) also found that marital satisfaction varied throughout the life cycle. Couples experienced a marked decline in marital satisfaction when there were school age children in the home. Increases in satisfaction were found when children were beyond school age and when the couple approaches or experiences the empty nest stage. Gurin, Veroff and Feld (1960) found that the curvilinear relationship was characterized by a long term decline in satisfaction beginning early in the marriage which reached its lowest point near the empty nest stage, and increased in later stages. Although there is a fair amount of variability in these findings with regard to where the satisfaction levels peak and flatten, it is fairly clear that decreases in satisfaction are correlated with the child-rearing stages, and increases with the absence of children from the home.

Another group of studies have examined the association between marital satisfaction and the presence of children by comparing couples with children to childless couples. In general these studies have found greater

satisfaction in the childless groups. For example, Campbell (1975) found that childless wives over 30 are as satisfied with life as women their age who have children. However, childless husbands over 30 experience the highest satisfaction in life of all men in the sample. And Feldman (1974) found that childless couples were more satisfied than couples with children and that postpartum couples indicated less marital satisfaction than they did before the child was born. These studies are flawed methodologically. For one thing, the reasons for the childlessness are not identified, leaving ambiguity with regard to whether this state was voluntary or involuntary. Moreover, comparing childless couples with couples who have children introduces a very significant variable, the presence of children. This variable confounds the comparisons between the two groups.

A recent study (Hoffman, 1978) has corrected these design problems by comparing voluntarily childfree couples with couples who desire (but who do not yet have) children. This study found no significant difference between the two groups with respect to marital adjustment. However, this study was limited to only one stage of the life cycle (25-35 years of age). In light of the findings showing a curvilinear relationship between marital satisfaction and stages of the life cycle in couples who have children, it is important to investigate the satisfaction levels of childfree couples over the life cycle. I would propose that such an investigation be undertaken.

I would suggest that researchers be concerned not only with the consequences of the fertility decision for the happiness (adjustment or satisfaction) of the marriage over the life cycle, but also with the consequences for the fulfillment of the developmental possibilities of the marriage. That is, we should be concerned with discovering the

effect of the decision to have or not have children on the development of the marital relationship over the life cycle.

In order to conduct such an investigation it is necessary to have a conceptual model of the development of the marital relationship. Family developmental schemas have been prepared by Rollins and Feldman (1970) and Rodgers (1964). These models however are not useful for the purposes of such research in that the conceptualization of the different stages is based on the process of child rearing. What is needed is a model of the developmental possibilities (or of the stages of development) of the marriage alone, without reference to the children, to use a framework for the direct comparison of childfree with child-anticipated or child-present couples.

De Frank (1978) has developed a model for the development of committed couple relationships which is characterized by a relatively predictable progression through a series of seven stages. The stages are defined in terms of core tasks and core conflicts, and include characterizations of the nature of intimacy, power, and boundary issues at the various stages. This is an epigenetic model in which successful resolution of stages is necessary for the attainment of later stages. The model is presented in Figure one. I would propose the use of this model and the related assessment methods to compare the developmental status of childfree with child-anticipated or present couples over the life cycle.

Insert Figure one here

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(2) The decision to not have children will not diminish the potentialities for the individual's development over the life cycle. Particular reference is made to the stage of generativity which is typically associated with parenthood.

Recently, several theories have been assembled which describe the various stages of individual development over the adult portion of the life cycle (Erikson, 1963; Leveinson, 1977; Gould, 1972). The individual, according to these theories, must confront the issues and complete the tasks essential to each stage in order to achieve successful adult development. The most interesting comparison of couples would be with regard to generativity, the psychosocial stage which has been commonly associated with parenthood (Erikson, 1963; Bardwick, 1974). Generativity is defined as the ability to create and involve oneself with future generations and is considered critical for an individual's successful adult development. Failure to develop these abilities can lead to the egocentric position known as "stagnation" (Erikson, 1963).

Erikson concluded, however, that childbearing does not necessarily mean that one has adequately developed creative, generative abilities. In addition, he observed that people can potentially develop these abilities through means other than parenting their own children. Even Deutsch (1945: 175) conceded that a woman who is sterile may be able to compensate for the expression of the need to parent: "... a woman can fully possess and enjoy metherliness even if she has not conceived, borne, and given birth to a child." Levinson (1977) is in agreement with this view. He states that even though generativity parallels parenthood, it is associated with the development of prental behaviors such as accepting responsibility and offering leadership in society and to new generations.

The only study to date which has examined the issue of generativity in relationship to voluntary childlessness is Hoffman's (1978) project. Generativity concerns were assessed using the Thematic Apperception Test and a questionnaire item requiring a retrospective view of one's life. Projective methods were selected because the couples ranged in age from 25-35 and were not necessarily in the generativity stage of development. The results indicated that the groups did not differ in their expressed need to be generative. Women, however, in both groups tended to receive higher generativity scores than men in both groups. This study was limited by the measurement strategies as well as the age range of the couples. In future research, I would suggest comparing couples throughout the life cycle.

CONCLUSION

To summarize and conclude, in this article I first discussed the importance of the social phenomenon of voluntary childlessness and presented a critique of existing research in this area. I then presented a formulation of a research strategy, based on a consideration of both theory and prior research.

Three propositions concerning the antecedents of voluntary childlessness were presented. The first addressed the issue of the sex-role identifications of the individual marital partners and the characteristics of their relationship which support the choice of voluntary childlessness as an alternative lifestyle. The second addressed the issue of the origin of androgynous sex role identifications and non-traditional fertility values in the families of origin of the marital partners. The third addressed the issue of the making of fertility

decisions through marital interactional and decision-making processes.

Two propositions dealt with the consequences of voluntary childlessness. One of these concerned the consequences for the couple, both in terms of their marital happiness and the possibilities for the development of their relationship over the life cycle. The other concerned the consequences for the individual marital partners in terms of their own developmental processes, particularly in regard to the psychosocial stage of generativity.

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Age	18-21 yrs.	22-28 yrs.	29-31 yrs.	32-39 yrs.	40-42 yrs.	43-50 yrs.	60+ yrs.
Length of Relationship	1-3 yrs.	4-7 yrs.	8-10 yrs.	11-18 yrs.	19-21 yrs.	22-38 yrs.	39+ yrs.
Individual Stage	Pulling up Roots	Provisional Adulthood	Transition age 30	Settling Down	Mid-life Transition	Middle Adulthood	Older Age
Individual Task	Developing Autonomy	Developing intimacy and career identity	Deciding about commitment to work and relationship	Deepening commitments pursuing more long-range goals	Searching for fit between dreams and reality	Reestablishing and reordering priorities	Dealing effectively with aging, illness and death while retaining zest for life
CORE Task	Shift from family of origin to new relationship	Provisional commitment	Commitment crisis, restlessness	Productivity: children, work, friends, relationship	Evaluating success and failure, seeking future goals	Resolving conflicts; stabilizing relationship	Supporting each other's struggle for fulfillment in face of threat of aging
CORE Conflict	Original family ties conflict with adaptation	Uncertainty about choice of partner; stress over parenthood	Doubt about choice: rates of growth may diverge if one has not successfully negotiated stage 2 because of parental obligations	Mates have different and conflicting ways of achieving productivity	Mates perceive success differently; conflict between individual success and remaining in the relationship	Conflicting rates and directions of emotional growth; concerns about losing youthfulness may lead to depression and or acting out	Conflicts are generated by rekindled fear of desertion, loneliness, and sexual failure

Figure one: De Frank's Schema of Couple Development

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